Rhythms of the Mind

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Meditation practice is like medication for the mind. As there are lots of different kinds of meditation, there’s a kind of meditation where the mind is soothed, whether it’s nourished. There’s a kind of meditation that cleans things out of the mind, just like there are medicines that nourish the body, strengthen the body, like vitamins. As with any course of medicine, you have to look at what your particular disease is to see what you need. And you have to learn how to use the different kinds of medicine in a balanced way. Most people coming here, especially in the West, our minds are worn out. The heart is worn out. There’s so much stimulation, so many issues, that our main need is nourishing meditation. Meditation that soothes the rawness of the mind, so we have a greater sense of well-being, a greater sense of energy. You can find this in different ways of breathing. And you’ll find that the mind settles down in different ways. Sometimes it settles down in a way where nothing much happens. It’s just very, very still. And that’s the nourishing kind of medicine. Sometimes you find that the mind settles down in a way that a lot of things come up. In other words, the mind is no longer distracted by its day-to-day activities. It settles down to a level where old issues start coming up. And you want to be able to handle these things, to kind of get them out of the way. Get them out of your system. And simply the fact of allowing them to arise and be recognized, that helps to clear away a lot of things that you’ve been holding, carrying around. This is the kind of medicine that clears you out. But you have to learn how to use both kinds in balance. If you simply rest and rest and rest and don’t do anything at all, don’t do any clearing out at all, it feels good, it feels comfortable, but still there’s a lot of stuff you’re carrying around. If you start just clearing everything out, it’s like taking a medic that keeps flushing you out, flushing you out. You can wear yourself out. So you have to be careful. It’s good to have both kinds of concentration and learn how to use them in balance. Because there is that tendency when you find that issues that used to be carried around unresolved can finally come to some sort of resolution. You want to plow through as many issues as you can, get them all out of your system, and it can wear you out. So you need to learn how to nourish yourself, how much flushing out is enough, how much is too much, and where to turn when you’re wearing yourself out, where to go back to that state of concentration where things are just very still so the mind can have some time to recoup its energy. So it’s not the case that there’s just one ideal form of concentration. There’s one ideal form of meditation, just as there’s no one medicine that cures all your illnesses. The breath is useful in that it can provide many of these different functions. There are ways of focusing on the breath that are just really, really still. Nothing much happens. You’re just plowed into the breath, focused in on the breath. Then there’s a lighter stage of concentration where you’re still with the breath, the breath energies in the body, and things can come up. And when things come up, it’s not just a matter of watching them and letting them go. You have to have the right attitude towards them. Back when I was first meditating, soon after my ordination, I was up on a hillside alone on an island. And sometimes the mind would be still, and sometimes it would be all over the place. Old issues would come up, things from childhood, things from high school. And sometimes it was overwhelming. It was good to have a jhanvu down at the bottom of the hill. I could run things past him. And in the absence of a teacher around all the time, it was good to read the Dhamma to get a sense of values. Because that’s a lot of what the suttas teach you, what’s really important, what’s not important, how to get a perspective on things. Sometimes you hear that simply mastering a particular meditation technique will take care of everything. Well, that seems to work only in countries where people have already had a really good grounding in the Dhamma, either in actually having read it or in living in a culture that’s picked up a lot of the attitudes that are embodied in the Dhamma. But for those of us here in the West, it’s hard. Our culture has a lot of anti-Dhammic attitudes. So it’s good to read the teachings of the Ajahn, it’s good to read the teachings of the Buddha, to help you get some perspective on the issues that come up in the course of your meditation. Because some things will be resolved simply by watching. But for others, you have to be careful not to get sucked into the old problems all over again, the old anger, the old desires, the old fears. When they get overwhelmed, you have to let go. When they get overwhelming, you need to be able to step out of them. To use another analogy, it’s like learning Thai boxing. The first thing they teach you is how to retreat, how to pull out, get away when the opponent’s too dangerous, how to pull back in a way where you’re not exposing yourself to more danger, so that you sense when things are getting too difficult you have a place to go back to. In the same way, it’s good to have that state of meditation where things are just very, very still. Nothing much happens, things are very quiet. So that when you’re working on analyzing things or if you’re in the state of concentration where things are coming up and it gets to be too much, you have a place to step back to. For example, facing a Jon Mun’s death, realizing that he was going to be losing the refuge he’d had, questions came up in his meditation. He could go to a Jon Mun. But it wasn’t the case that Jon Mun would answer his questions all the time. Sometimes he’d leave them hanging as a way of reminding himself that not everything can be taken to the teacher. You’ve got to learn how to depend on yourself. But there were times when things were really getting out of balance. He’d go to a Jon Mun, and the Jon Mun would point out what he needed to know. Then after Jon Mun passed away, he was reflecting on the fact that he didn’t have that refuge anymore. He felt like a wild animal in the forest with no doctors at all. Whatever illnesses came up, you just had to live with them. But then he realized there were a few teachings of a Jon Mun’s that he could remember and put into use. One of the most important ones was that anything strange comes up in the meditation. This can refer to visions, it can refer to old issues coming up, or any insights that you’re not really 100 percent sure of. He said, “Just go back to that sense of the knower, just bare awareness.” It’s not really bare, but it’s just the fact that you’re knowing and you’re very still and watching and not coming to any immediate conclusions as to what’s good or bad. Go back to that sense of awareness and just stay there. Until things blow over. Because we’re not practicing to push, push, push our way into awakening. If you could push your way into awakening, as the Jon Foreman said, everybody would have been there right now. The process of training the mind, treating the mind, treating its illnesses, is a lot more subtle than that. Yesterday we had some one here who was talking about wanting to go into a deep meditation retreat where she could do nothing but meditate all the time. Her image was of trying to put a pot of water on the fire and making sure that she didn’t open the cover so that everything could finally boil inside. That image is potentially dangerous because there’s this tendency to just want to push, push, push and push through to something, have a breakthrough. What happens often is a breakdown. We’re not here to push our way through. We’re here to find the balance of the middle path, which is something very subtle. Just as in the treatment of a disease, you need to learn how to balance your medicines. So if there’s some flushing that needs to be done, then you can compensate for it by strengthening the body. But at the same time, you can’t just strengthen things all the time, because sometimes as you’re strengthening the body, you’re also strengthening the illness. So you have to learn how to bring things into balance. When you walk, you walk both with the left foot and with the right foot. Walking is easy. It’s just left, right, left, right, left, right. But the meditation of the mind is a lot more subtle. You have to learn the rhythms of the mind. It’s not as simple as the rhythms of the mind. But the basic principle holds. You’ve got to find balance. You’ve got to find what the rhythms of the mind are, to know when you’re pushing it too hard and when you’re not pushing it enough. So that whatever the disease of the mind that you’re treating, the treatment really does lead to greater health. It doesn’t wear you down. So you want a complete set of tools, just like a complete set of medicines, and the ability to learn through trial and error what the proper balance is. And what saves the error from just being one long continuous error is that knowledge that a balancing act can be. We’re not pushing the mind out to some extremity where it finally breaks into awakening. It usually just breaks down. That’s not what we want. So hold the image of balance in mind, like the old-fashioned balances that would swing back and forth, back and forth, for a while, until they finally came to rest. Realize that things will not be perfectly balanced all the time. Sometimes you do have to lean a little bit more to the left, and sometimes you do have to lean a little bit more to the right. But the goal is to come to balance. Keeping that image in mind will save you a lot of grief. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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